Death In The Family *by Peter Brooks*

IT is an experience that almost everyone will have to cope with, sooner or later: the death of a close relative.

In my case it happened to me when my father, just two days after his 65th birthday, suffered a massive angina attack and an hour later died while under the care of his doctor.

The event was sudden and unexpected — as these things always are — and the rest of the family was, like me, totally unprepared.

Like all emotionally charged events, the circumstances surrounding such a sudden loss become etched in one's mind. Ten years later and I can still remember most of it as if it happened yesterday.

I had come down from Oxford to Ramsgate in Kent to help celebrate my father's 65th — the day he "officially" retired from work, or as he put it, the day he could finally be free of the clutches of the SS (otherwise known as DoHSS or the Department of Health and Social Security).

The SS, who were after all only doing their job (now where have I heard that before?) had continued to insist — despite his very poor health after retiring from the Thames Valley Police Force — that he look for work in the local area. They did that to him for the entire ten years between his retirement from Thames Valley (forced on him because he fulfilled the requirements for being "old" at 55) and his death, despite the fact that he was signed off sick the whole time.

I had stayed up late the night following his birthday, which we had celebrated quietly among ourselves at my parents' home. That meant I wasn't in any hurry to get up the following morning, and so I hadn't set any alarm or asked for a wake up call. I was, after all, technically on holiday.

I was awoken abruptly by Mum around 9.30 a.m. as I recall. She told me that my father was having a severe angina attack and had been trying to call out to me for some time, but in his weakened state had been unable to make me hear him from the floor below. The doctor had been called and she wanted me to wait with my father while she put away the groceries she had just returned from buying locally.

"He's in my bedroom, on the bed. Just hold his hand" she suggested, "to give him some moral support."

I'd done this before, many years ago, when he was in hospital following surgery for kidney stones, and some negligence had left him contending with bacterial shock after a post surgical drain failed to be connected properly. The consequence of that was a hernia over one of his kidneys, and his party trick in later years was to get you to place your hand over his back while he coughed — you could feel the kidney punch out against your hand through the gap in his stomach wall. It broke the ice at parties, I guess. Not that he was the partying type.

Sitting on the bed holding his hand while he lay there clutching his chest, I learned that he had been taken ill while in town on an errand. He'd hurried back home as the pain mounted, but when he finally collapsed into an armchair in the living room he discovered that his angina medication — his "TNT" as he called the nitroglycerine spray — which he thought was at home, was in fact in his back trouser pocket, but he couldn't muster the strength to stand up and retrieve the bottle.

He'd tried calling out to me but I was too soundly asleep, so he sat there for ages before managing to reach over to the phone and call his GP at the local surgery. She was despatched "immediately", and since the surgery was only about a quarter mile away, was expected to be there in minutes. Shortly after that, Mum arrived home having completed her errands.

Almost three quarters of an hour had passed after the call and still the doctor hadn't arrived. I was about to call the surgery again to find out what the holdup was, when we heard a knock at the front door.

I went to answer it, and there stood the doctor, looking harassed and annoyed. I don't recall our exact words, but it transpired that she had gone to a similarly named street in the next town, which was why she was so late, and she demanded to know how long my father had been vomiting.

"Vomiting?" I asked her. "He's having a severe angina attack." That seemed to annoy her still further. "I was told he was being violently sick" she fumed, as if having an angina attack was much lower on the scale of domestic emergencies.

I showed her through to Mum's bedroom, and at that point things begin to get a little hazy. I think Mum went in with the doctor but soon came out again, and we heard voices raised in anger coming from the bedroom. The doctor was reprimanding my father (something he wouldn't have taken very kindly). She clearly thought she had been called out under a false pretext.

Then we heard him call Mum by his pet name for her. "Annie!" He sounded very frightened.

The next minute the bedroom door opened quickly and the doctor shouted "Call an ambulance — now! Dial 999 — tell them he's having a heart attack!"

I don't think I have ever been so scared, either before or since. I dashed into the living room, made the call with tremulous voice, and then went to the bedroom to see if there was anything I could do to help.

What I saw then will stay with me for ever. My father, lying on his back on the bed, lower arms pointing towards the ceiling with hands flopped over, his face the

deepest purple I have ever seen, and his eyes wide open, the pupils filled with something that looked almost like gold particles, was already dead, and there was a peculiar chemical odour in the air.

My first thought was how to resuscitate him, but the doctor was already fishing in her bag for a plastic contraption to push down his throat and keep his tongue out of the way. I asked her what I should do, and she told me to get on the bed and push down hard on his chest. I'd had a little CPR training so I wasn't too unprepared.

But the bed was too soft and he just bounced up and down — my pressure on his chest was ineffectual. I suggested to the doctor that we should get him onto the floor, but he was too heavy for me to move by myself and she refused to help me, saying that it was best to leave him where he was.

There wasn't much room, admittedly, to get him onto the floor, but with hindsight I wish I had insisted, and maybe called Mum to help.

The GP took over, pushing down as ineffectually on Dad's chest as I had, and blowing down the plastic contraption, which kept breaking apart so she wasn't getting any air into his lungs at all.

With hindsight I realise she would have done much better if she had employed the traditional mouth to mouth method.

Shortly afterwards — less than ten minutes after the 999 call — an ambulance crew arrived and Mum let them in. The bedroom was too small for us all, so I moved out into the hallway to stand with Mum, unable to think clearly, on the brink of a disaster for which nothing had prepared us.

After just a couple of minutes, the ambulance crew left. We tried to talk to them, but for some reason they all looked very angry and no one would speak to us. That caused our fear to mount to its highest pitch.

Finally the doctor came out. "I'm sorry." she said in a brisk, matter of fact voice, "His blood pressure was entirely normal when I arrived." And with that she handed us a piece of paper and went out through the front door.

Both Mum and I were confused. Was Dad alive or dead? Mum went into the bedroom and her wail told me the answer. She was begging Dad not to leave her, over and over again

I can remember Mum and I holding each other, sobbing, the tears falling hot and fast — then as now — as we tried to come to terms with the stark reality of what had happened. It had all come to pass so quickly. One minute he had a bout of severe chest pains, something he'd had before without incident, the next he was taken from us forever. It was too much to absorb in a short space of time.

The piece of paper turned out to be a death certificate, but I hadn't a clue what to do with it. A visitor — the wife of a local hospital consultant who had been treating Dad — rescued me. I still don't know why she turned up, but I'm pleased she did. I've never had to deal with a death in this way, but she obviously had, and she ferried me to the local council offices to formally register Dad's death and obtain official certificates which would be required for various organisations.

The lady advised me to check my father's body for personal items — jewelry, wallet, whatever — since he was due to be transferred to the local funeral home that afternoon. It would not have occurred to me to do that, and as she pointed out, she didn't expect that anyone at the funeral home would steal from his body, but it was as well to remove any temptation.

In some small way I guess that my time working in a hospital served me a little in the task. On the odd occasion that I had helped to handle preserved bodies used for surgical research I had found a way to mentally distance myself a little from the proceedings. Otherwise it felt a little too ghoulish, I suppose.

It took forever for me to work the wedding ring off my father's finger. I even found myself talking to him as if he were alive but incapacitated. It helped. I removed his watch and checked his pockets for valuables. There were none.

It was an odd experience. He looked so — alive — as if he were only sleeping. The deep purple tinge to his face had gone, his eyes were closed and he appeared peaceful. It was so hard to accept that he was genuinely dead.

Small revelations occurred along the way as birth certificates and other documents passed through my hands for the first time in my life. I learned that my Mum's name was not Anne, but Annie, and that my father hadn't been christened George Foster Quintenelia as we thought — and he'd always told us — but George Foster.

The director of my research unit back at Oxford was a gem: she told me to take whatever time off that I thought necessary, no matter how long, and to let her know if I needed anything. In the event I took three weeks, on full pay, and for that help in a moment of need I will always be grateful.

One of the hardest things was telephoning the rest of the family to let them know what had happened. It hit them as hard as it had hit me — like a sledgehammer. While they lacked the direct experience of being on the scene at the time, it hurt them more deeply in other ways.

One of my sisters told me that what pained her most was not having had the opportunity to tell him that she loved him, that she was sorry for any pain that she had caused him when she was younger. I hadn't had that opportunity either

— there was no indication that I was about to witness his last few moments alive — but I guess in my sister's eyes, being there up until just before the very end meant that I had at least had physical contact with him. She hadn't even had the chance to hold his hand.

Odd pieces of information given to us by those more knowledgeable about such things threw us into confusion from time to time. For example, we learned that in the event of a death at home like this, the police should have been informed and the coroner should have opened an inquest. For some reason that was never done. We also learned that a bereavement visit was supposed to be carried out by the GP's practice, but that never happened either. We didn't really care; our focus was our shared grief.

Gradually we imposed some structure on things. The funeral date was set and we began notifying friends and my father's former co workers. The family gathered together, each making arrangements to take time off so we could all be with Mum.

The first seeds of dissension were sown. My father had wanted to be buried when he died, but the general consensus was that he should be cremated. The feeling was that Mum would ultimately have to move to be closer to the rest of the family, and having a burial plot in a local cemetery might make it difficult for her to leave the area.

I objected, feeling that Dad's wishes should be honoured, and I figured that if Mum wanted to stay in the area — or move anywhere else — that was her choice and her business. My objections were overruled.

Then the notification to be placed in the newspapers caused some friction. Initially we agreed on the wording but then the cost was examined and the others decided that the wording should be reduced to bring down the cost (which wasn't that astronomical — I was happy to pay for it all myself) and again my objections were overruled.

I had never been really close to my father, although we had grown closer after he had retired. The others were never really close to him either. But for some reason I felt that we weren't doing the man justice in his final moments. I felt no small sense of betrayal of him. I had — and still have — the feeling that a person's final farewell to this Earth should not be the subject of petty cost cutting.

My parents' small house was crammed to the gills with the entire family staying for a few days. I ended up sleeping in my father's room and in his bed — and talking to him tearfully for most of the night. Addressing the thin air seemed to help me in my deep grief, despite my lack of belief in an afterlife.

My sisters ended up staying in Mum's room a great deal of the night — that had been the room, after all, in which he had died, and I think perhaps it was, understandably, spooking Mum. I know that, for as long as she lived there, each year on the anniversary of his death she would make sure she was out of the house at the exact time he had died.

Either way, none of us really slept for the first few nights. The impact of the trauma was just too great.

The kids — my nephews and nieces — were wonderful, despite largely being too young to fully understand what had happened. The older children, entering their teens, were better able to understand the grief that the adults were feeling. From the younger ones there was no whingeing about not being able to go to the beach or having to keep the noise of play to a minimum. At least that's how I remember it.

We visited Dad in the funeral home's chapel of rest so that the other members of the family could say their farewells. The undertakers had prepared his body using techniques that apparently dated back to Victorian times: his fingernails had been filed to points and his head was placed at such an odd angle, as if he was bowing while lying on his back. It was disconcerting.

One of us — I forget who exactly — took hold of one of his hands and in turn we each held it for a few minutes. When the elder of my two young sisters took her turn, she suddenly exclaimed "His hand is warm!" as if perhaps he had been playing some prank all this time and was in fact alive. Human tissue responds very quickly to heat even in death and our own hands had warmed his. That was even more disconcerting.

On the day of the funeral the skies were overcast and it rained on and off. I don't know if it would have been better if the sun had been shining strongly; funeral days always seem to look grey and depressing no matter what the weather.

We expected a large group to be travelling up from Oxford, comprising many of the police officers with whom Dad had worked over the years. We had been told that a bus was to be hired to bring them all, and Mum and my sisters prepared extra sandwiches ready to feed them all afterwards.

Nobody turned up. The funeral was rendered all the more sad and depressing by the lack of attendance. Aside from immediate family, the only other people who came were a couple of neighbours and the consultant's wife. I can't say I blame the officers — it was a working day after all, and the Police Force has never been known for its compassion — and it was a 160 mile journey to get to us, but it would have been a nice send off for Dad.

The funeral cars arrived in the street. We climbed aboard and a pall bearer walked sedately up the

steep hill ahead of us, in the old fashion of funerals. He was puffing though by the time he got to the top.

Some of the houses on the street had their living room curtains pulled together, but a gap had been left in the middle where they would otherwise have met. This is a North of England custom designed to show respect for the deceased and support for the bereaved family, and it touched me to see it used in the South. Our father was a Yorkshireman and our Mum hailed from Tyne and Wear — perhaps the neighbours realised that; I will never know.

I remember very little of the brief church service. No one had anything to say — we were all too distrait — and I could barely even sing, let alone stand up in front of even a small gathering and speak about my father without the risk of breaking down in tears.

By the time we walked outside, the light rain had stopped and the sun was peeping out from behind the clouds, generating warmth and making everything seem that little bit brighter. It was a typical late Summer September day, and it seemed to raise our spirits just a little. I remember commenting about how nice it was that the weather had eased off. It's something we Brits are known for the world over: focussing on the weather no matter what else is going on.

We climbed back in to the funeral cars and headed out of town to the crematorium. Again there was a very short service and then the coffin was transferred through the curtains out of sight. We walked around and looked at the few wreaths that had been sent by various people who knew us, before setting off back to the house.

We still harboured some slim hope that the promised busload of policemen might turn up, but as the evening drew in we knew they weren't coming. It would have been nice if just one or two had managed to make the journey.

It took several days for the ashes to be made available by the crematorium — and it was made clear to us that Dad's ashes might not be his alone. In the meantime the rest of the family had headed for their respective homes and jobs. We arranged for another, final, family gathering for the scattering of the ashes.

We weren't entirely certain where to scatter them. The consensus was that since my father had apparently enjoyed his time with the Royal Navy and had also enjoyed taking a turn along the harbour wall in Ramsgate, we should scatter his ashes at sea.

That proved to be too expensive, and anyway, we didn't want our grief to be compounded with seasickness.

The next thought was to scatter his ashes into the sea from the harbour wall, but it turned out that that too cost a considerable amount, and we would have had to apply for a special license to do so.

In the end we decided to be slightly criminal — ironic considering my father's former profession as a Police Officer — and scatter the ashes from the harbour wall without permission. After all, who would it hurt?

So we gathered together at dusk and drove down to the harbour. Our younger sister had found pictures of a Spitfire fighter and a Lancaster bomber (my father had flown in Lancs during the war) and we figured we'd cast them into the water as well — just a little gesture that seemed a nice thing to do, a bit like burying the pharaoh with his badges of office.

We must have looked most suspicious, lurking in such a group, furtively glancing around and shuffling along the wall until we found a part that actually had some sea beside it — true to form, the tide was out.

We waited until there was no one nearby and then we opened the urn and pulled out the polythene bag containing the ashes. We began to shake the ashes over the wall as my younger sister tried to throw the two cut out paper airplanes after them.

But sea breezes are a fact of life on such structures, and one blew up just as we began the task of scattering Dad at sea. It threw the paper planes back at us and took a sizeable amount of Dad and scattered him over us — mostly over me.

We picked up the paper planes and resumed trying to throw them and the remainder of Dad's ashes over the harbour wall and into the sea. The onshore wind insisted on blowing everything back at us, but we persisted until finally we were successful.

I couldn't help laughing. It didn't feel as though Dad was resisting so much as Nature demonstrating that even in death it, after all, always has the last word.